

International Yearbook of Oral History
and Life Stories

VOLUME I

Memory and Totalitarianism

Special Editor
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Preface

The publication of the first *Yearbook* marks a great step forward for all of us in the humanities and social sciences who seek to understand the recent past and the changing present through autobiographical testimony, whether in the form of written autobiography, oral history, or life-story interviews.

Each year we shall be publishing a new *Yearbook* which like this, the first, stands in its own right as an independent, coherent book on a single theme, but also contributes cumulatively to our aims as a regular annual publication.

The series is both international and interdisciplinary. It builds on the experience and co-operation developed through the publication of *Life Stories/Recits de vie* in Europe and the *International Journal of Oral History* in North America and was conceived as a joint successor to both journals. The editorial team is international. It combines a strong European network with a parallel North American team, and also links to Australasia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. For the third volume editorial responsibility will cross the Atlantic. We are committed to developing real, practical editorial and intellectual co-operation between cultures, nationalities, and continents. And between languages. Our earlier experience of publishing a two-language annual proved disappointing in terms of communication across the language barriers through this approach. So this time we publish in English only, but put much more of our efforts into translation. This first book includes articles which originated in German, Russian, and Italian and reviews of literature in these languages as well as in French and Spanish.

We are at the same time fundamentally interdisciplinary. The series is intended not only for contemporary historians, sociologists, and anthropologists but also for those with overlapping interests in problems of memory, autobiography, and narrative in psychology and literature. Our editorial team includes recognized leaders in all these fields.

This first *Yearbook* focuses on a theme which, in geographical terms, is much narrower than those which are to follow. The second is to be on cultural transmission between generations, and the third on migration and identity: two themes which are truly international.

The achievement of this volume is nevertheless close to the heart of our intentions. It crosses an ideological frontier which divided the world for most of our lifetimes. It wrestles with the most painful memories which we in Europe have of this century at the end of the Cold War. Yet, as we have manifestly seen since 1989, the political implications of the memory of European Nazism and Communism concern the entire world. The struggle for that memory and its meaning will shape our future: together, or apart.

Paul Thompson

October 1991

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Introduction

LUISA PASSKRIM

Ich bin der Engel der Verzweiflung. Mit meinen Händen teile ich
den Rausch aus, die Betaubung, das Vergessen . . . Meine Rede
ist das Schweigen, mein Gesang der Schrei.

(Heiner Müller, *Der Aufirag*; words used for the
composition *Frau/Stimme*, by Wolfgang Rihm)¹

I am the angel of despair. With my hands, I give you the narcotic,
the anaesthetic, the oblivion . . . My discourse is silence; my song
a scream.

In the play *Memorial* written by Else Marie I .aukvik and directed for the Odin Teatret by Eugenio Barba, two stories of people who survived the concentration camps are told. The first tells of young Moshe, who, almost dying of cold, is standing in the snow in Mauthausen with other naked prisoners, answering an interminable roll-call. But a memory comes to him, a memory of his rabbi and of a song he used to sing. That memory saves Moshe, who dances the old song until he can break the ice that imprisons his feet, and defeat cold and death. The second story is one of little Stella, witnessing the Nazis' assassination of her relatives and friends in her village in Galicia. She hides in a hole in the ground, where she remains for eight months. In that hole, among rats, her memory freezes in a desire for vengeance; but when liberation comes and she sees a public execution of Nazi officers, that vengeance appears incapable of real memory: vengeance does not reach back into the past, it remains chained to the uncontrolled screams of the excited crowd. Brought up short, Stella draws back, and in doing so perceives that only by distancing herself from the present can she retrace her true memory and her true self. The two stories are taken from *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* by Yaffa Eliach, and in the play they are accompanied by beautiful Yiddish folk-songs. They remind us of two triumphs of memory: triumph over

torture and over a 'wrong' type of memory, a frozen and rancorous one, in favour of life and innovation. But the play does not finish with this happy ending. It continues with a second part, where the main actress mechanically repeats pieces of memory—phrases, words, all jumbled up in an incoherent stammering—in which one can only distinguish some sense if one already knows the complete story: dreadful details of torture are mixed up with happy associations of times long gone by. And in the final ending, the two protagonists present the photographs of Primo Levi and Jean Amery (Hans Mayer),³ who both committed suicide many years after the concentration camps had ceased to exist. Their images challenge us to have a less optimistic view of memory, enigmatically posing the question of our time and its relation to the recent past of Europe.

What are some possible meanings of the enigma posed by the play? A first conclusion is that today it is not sufficient to survive physically. A second is that not even sheer remembering is quite up to the tasks of the present. What is required is indeed not a simple and spontaneous memory, not the one that stems from a need for vengeance, for instance, but a memory of a memory, a memory that is possible because it evokes another memory. We can remember only thanks to the fact that somebody has remembered before us, that other people in the past have challenged death and terror on the basis of their memory. Remembering has to be conceived as a highly inter-subjective relationship.⁴

In the first part of the play, memory struggles with a totalitarianism that wants to cancel a whole people and their culture from the face of the earth; in this *corps a corps* it finds strength in its own lability: it associates the great and the small, the important aspects and the details, lightly, asystematically, simply out of love for pleasure and life. In its very essence, memory repeats and replays, reproducing the stories of ancestors and old masters, their songs, their traditions. But the painful faces of Jean Amery and Primo Levi remind us of the destiny of memory in our contemporary world; their images break up the thread of the story as well as the thread of memory. Like the laughter of the crowd watching the execution of the war criminals—a crowd that has reverted to barbarity because it is not capable of fully remembering the past—the mere repetition of what is remembered by, or said to, those who do not really wish to remember, itself also sounds like a broken and stammering gramophone: one word here and one there, a mixture of associations that have lost their original meaning, a

language of folly and of non-communication. There is nothing left to transmit if nobody is there to receive the message.

The richness of the original stories about Moshe and Stella is lost in a disorder which can be compared to the excess of daily messages that we receive today, whereby not silence but shouting and loud noise circumscribe and confuse the human word. In the play, the final image is that of a stranger singing and crying under a tree, and this image expresses our condition: a memory that is a stranger to the world, which will not be able to become a house for human beings without accepting that stranger and his estrangement. Those who committed suicide left, by their gesture, a message for us: now it is our turn to remember and sing again the old song of the rabbi, but sing it in a way that is up to date with our time, yet contrasts with this time's tendency to forget. After all, memory is the tool we have in order to give meaning to our lives, if we understand it in the sense of an inter-subjective (or inter-human) word that connects different generations, times, and places.

This *Yearbook*, with which we start a series of annual books about memory and life experiences, tries to give some responses to the questions posed by the Odin Teatret in *Memoria*. It is not merely chance that led us to start this new publication with the theme 'Memory and Totalitarianism'. Europe's past has been brought up to date, and the question of understanding it has been made more urgent by the events of August 1991 in Moscow and in what used to be called the Soviet Union. The invasion of the streets by Russian people rejecting the *coup d'etat* was the culmination of a process that had been initiated years before; once again it raises crucial questions in a way that cannot be eluded: To what extent can these events be considered the end of an era stretching from the First World War to the 1980s, when Europe experienced many forms of dictatorship? To what extent can these forms be grouped together? Can any sort of affinity be established between them?

We are aware that the very title of this *Yearbook* runs the risk of equating all sorts of regimes under the label of totalitarianism. Such a 'reductionist' approach might be coupled with another possible impoverishment if we believed that the problem of memory could be reduced to a question of oral history or a collection of oral memories from living people. But the issue of memory today is such a massive one, involving much more than orality and individuals, that it would be

absurd to think that we can do more than give our specific contribution to a much larger problem. What we shall try to do, therefore is to situate the findings of oral history in the context of contemporary memory, making some references to other fields, like the social sciences, but also to literature, music, the theatre, and the local toponymy. Thus, we can reasonably expect to avoid the second reduction we have mentioned; as for the first one, however, we ourselves cannot easily be reassured.

Let us put our stand in context. We speak from a place—Europe—which likes to portray itself as a laboratory for democracy, where the ability to speak (*l'aptitude a la parole*) appears to be the essential force of opposition. To be a democrat means to consider that the main political task is to acknowledge that every person has the right and should have the opportunity to speak and to engage in a real dialogue. We know all too well that our present means of expression very rarely serves the purposes of a real democracy, 'yet to be created', while ours is 'chronically suffocated',⁵ and that we lack a real 'public word', a real possibility of the expression of free opinion in the public sphere. Therefore we speak from a contradiction, and yet this is our only strength: we are under no illusion that we hold the truth; we know that democracy's one truth lies in its rules, intended to let everyone express his/her truth. This is the European legacy, the main contribution that this part of the world has made to the world at large, although it must be added that until now democracy has been a very incomplete and imperfect legacy. On a historical level, there is much that would deserve further study in order to clarify the pluralistic nature of democracy in the European heritage. Suffice it to think of the multiple traditions of resistance to Fascism and Nazism: the roots of antitotalitarianism range from Communism to Liberalism in this case, and some of the most interesting areas for us today are represented by those minority groups that proposed hybrids like Liberal-Socialism, while trying to amalgamate the two contradictory ideals of justice and freedom.

On a theoretical level, we could say that, on the one hand, the concept of democracy emerging in Europe in the last two decades stresses formalism as an essential feature: 'democracy, as counterposed to all forms of autocratic government, is characterized by sets of rules that establish *who* is authorized to take collective decisions and by *which* procedures'. On the other hand, increasing attention is being given to the actual situations that allow the rules to be enacted: 'those

who are called to decide, or to elect those who will decide, must be confronted with real alternatives, and able to choose between them'.⁶ In practice, the preconditions for the exercise of democracy include full respect for ethnic and gender differences. Contributions from movements based on such differences indicate that democracy must be pluralistic and must include various forms, such as the combination of direct and representative democracies; this is the only way to revive participation by people in democratic institutions.⁷ A major problem in theoretical and political terms would be for a 'left'—if such a word were to take up some new meanings, given the collapse of the old ones—to reformulate the concept of democracy. The task would involve distinguishing the historical form it took through the Anglo-American heritage, and therefore its connection with imperialism, from its potential strength in terms of rights, focusing on the needs of the majority of people, until now excluded from the actual exercise of democratic rights.

The main task for the immediate future is to translate the principles of formal democracy into something meaningful for all the people of the south and east of the world (if we can still adopt the old idea of Europe, a western area closely linked with the United States, as a geographical point of reference). If we confront our contradictory situation with that of the regimes which are generically labelled as totalitarian, we find that it differentiates itself from them, because they are obliged to possess a truth, whether it is placed in the laws of history, as in Marxism-Leninism, or in biology and race, as in Hitlerism, or the State, as in Fascism.⁸ It thus becomes clear that, in our context, the use of the word 'totalitarianism' refers in the first place to the speaking or writing subject, i.e. ourselves. It is a subjective point of departure, which we assume will change during our research. We recognize that the dichotomy of despotism and free society has been essential to the self-awareness of Western societies, but at the same time we are aware of the elements of ideology in this dichotomy, implicit in the dialectics of enlightenment that originated it, involving at the same time both elements of domination and also of liberation.

It should be clear that the use of 'totalitarianism' on our part implies only a partial acceptance of its traditional implications. One of the most important ones is its link with the concept of 'masses', as containers that absolute powers fill with whatever contents they decide. It is a central assumption of most oral history that people always have something to say on what is proposed to or even imposed on them, or

at least that potentially every individual has an understanding and an interpretation of his/her history as well as of 1 listory. From this perspective, we are all in some way the 'masses', in as far as we have all been subjected to the effects of unifonnizing modernity, and yet, in certain respects, we all believe ourselves to be the subjects of our own lives, capable of counteracting those levelling influences. At the same time, we might see a powerful potential for equality in these forces, so long as we do not forget that any real equality must be based on the recognition and respect of differences.

As oral historians we use the term 'totalitarianism' in a partial and critical sense, but above all in order to remember that there have been similarities of oppression among systems of thought and power that were in many ways very different. In addition to this, there were even similarities and connections in the forms of subjectivity that Fascism and anti-Fascism fostered. This difficult theme has hardly been addressed by historians, but has not escaped the acute glance of literature. In the first volume of Peter Weiss's novel *Aesthetics of Resistance*, the protagonist, enrolled in the International Brigades fighting in Spain, expresses the roots of those similarities in a lucid self-analysis:

associated with the desire for a fundamental change, for the construction of a new existence, there was the feeling of our affinity with the country where the domination of capital had been overturned and where workers' power had been constructed. Our indignation and our rebellion would have been hopeless, had this country not represented for us something indestructible . . . Our own despair allowed us to understand that there too outbursts of folly and anger could take place. We approved of the intolerance with which they acted over there. Any wait-and-see policy had to be avoided. A reconciliation, an arrangement were inconceivable. One could talk about aberration, mistakes, panic, but for us any blow, any violence were justified. That country was isolated, as we were isolated and in that isolation we were linked to each other. That link gave us the only possible means for persevering, and it was in such perseverance that the peerless, seducing images of October lived on. No doubt, no hesitation could trouble those images.⁹

One future direction for historians should be the investigation of the nature of those images, their influence and roles, and their changes over time. Oral history could contribute some of the tools necessary to analyse memory for these purposes.

To outline our starting-point more precisely, we must emphasize that we use the term 'totalitarianism' almost exclusively for its implications

in the field of subjectivity, that is the historical study of memory, mentality, language, and cultural expression. Therefore we are interested in a very wide range of meanings of 'totalitarianism', extending to aspects that are of particular relevance to us, such as the idea of totalitarian mentality. This idea is usually based on a cult of consensus and authority that can be found in many circumstances, often within democratic regimes. Therefore, although this introduction is concerned with the European experience of totalitarianism, the theme calls for an expansion to include many other experiences that relate to totalitarianism in mentalities. One only needs to think about certain issues that are now being researched in oral history, such as racist attitudes against blacks in the South of the United States of America; or the cultural and psychological effects of apartheid in South Africa;¹⁰ or the Aborigines' claim to their own history and to a new idea of history, in Australia.¹¹ The results from those researches, and the comparison between them and others, could lead to larger and more meaningful comparative studies of memory and totalitarianism in the future.

From the perspective of continuity between capitalist democracy, that is a democracy which has been historically inseparable from the market, and totalitarianism—an approach not only of the Frankfurt School of Thought, but of many anti-Fascist historians—we can accept two ideas: that totalitarianism is not only external to us but also inside ourselves, with its roots continuously present in our societies and our lives; that totalitarian systems are social systems like other ones, in the sense that their language and discourse have a meaning for their protagonists, even if that meaning is unacceptable to us.¹² If we see the connection between democracies and totalitarian regimes—both historically (in 1920, 28 European states could be described as democracies and by the end of 1938, 16 had succumbed to dictatorship)¹³ and theoretically (the latter are transformations of the former and could develop only from democratic systems)—we can also see the conventionality of uniting a number of different regimes under the same title. Totalitarianisms are products of the twentieth century that go far beyond earlier manifestations of absolutism and autocracy in their effort to completely control political, social, and intellectual life, made possible by modern industrialism and technology. They also need to pretend to be democratic: that is why they not only require a system of propaganda as well as control of expression and communication, but must also impose on the whole population the necessity of

reciting what 'has to be said'. Totalitarianisms need the comedy of unanimity, and that is why they consider every invention and creativity, including poetry and jokes, as dangerous, while they have to encourage the capacity for copying and repeating. Democracies, on the other hand, host structures that facilitate the latent application of force as the oppression of persons by persons through unperceived structural violence that shapes ideologies, values, and dependencies.¹⁴

Yet we also know that Communist and Fascist regimes adopted quite distinct approaches precisely in terms of techniques of terror and propaganda, party organization, and one-man leadership, which are especially relevant for subjectivity and therefore for memory. Only very recently have we reached a position to fully appreciate these differences, with the new 'fever of history' and the 'almost pathological interest in the past' that started in the Soviet Union after 1987,¹⁵ and that is expressed in the very important work that individuals and groups like 'Memorial' have been doing (see Ch. 6). Their experience, now under way, sheds light on important aspects of memory, such as its capacity to permeate society in many ways: let us think, for instance, of the role that literature played in Eastern Europe and Russia, in recomposing and keeping alive collective memory in a society that had been forced into amnesia and had been subjected to a repeated rewriting of history, including the glorification of the tsars in the interest of Stalinism. Let us think of the changes of names of towns, roads and places that resulted in a cancellation of history as well as of geography.¹⁶ The obsessive repetition of new toponyms, celebrating the revolution, tended to abolish all regional and cultural diversities, reducing the whole country to the same image, that of the centre: ideology replaced memory, not simply by cancelling it, but by trying to impose an artificial and homologizing memory based on an imaginary, non-existent Soviet people. And in considering daily life, let us think of the fact that false memories were forged, individuals were pushed to destroy their own letters and diaries, and an atmosphere of lies and falsehood was perpetuated. All this makes clear in just how many ways memory can be disputed: in symbols, statues, museums, archives, and names. If the series of studies published by Pierre Nora on *Les lieux de la mémoire*¹⁷ had already shown to what extent collective memory and identity were connected with 'places'—in the largest sense of the word—recent developments in Eastern Europe have not only confirmed but widened our appreciation of the relevance of the 'theatres of

At the same time, all this deeply preoccupies whoever deals with memory, for two reasons. The first is related to the end of 'the hope principle' (*le principe esperance*¹⁸), with the collapse of 'avowed socialism', which is not only the failure of a system, but also the sign of a deadly crisis of hope and prophecy throughout the whole of Europe. It was because in the 1920s something was lost—the millenarist hope of putting into practice a free society—that it was necessary to create the myth of a socialist paradise: it became necessary to create a legendary USSR and to propagate its legend.²⁰ When the promise of a better future, more beautiful and more just, was revitalized by 1968, it influenced the very idea of time. As Renate Siebert writes in her analysis of the differences of memory of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany, 1968 gave 'our orphan generation' a new perspective on the past which was 'less disorientated and desperate', so that 'we could plan for the future and hope'; its failure was translated by part of that generation into individual choices that perpetuated despair, such as drugs, suicides, and terrorism. Belonging, politically if not always biologically, to that generation, we understand all too clearly the huge effort, in theoretical as well as moral terms, that the collapse of the Communist regimes implies, and the need for reflection on the whole heritage of Marxism.

The second reason is that observers have evidenced the risk of a new cancellation concerning the October Revolution and other historical events. Should the memory of the resistance of the people of Leningrad during the war be cancelled, or obscured, together with the name of that city? To reconstruct churches, and even whole boroughs, as well as to rename streets and towns is not sufficient to revitalize a memory that has been killed. All this is important, but the desire to do away with the past seems to perpetuate the violence of the present on memory; to act as if a large part of the past had never taken place. For the first reason, mentioned above, we feel that the West has a vital interest in giving the past what it deserves, differentiating the various parts of its heritage: for instance, differentiation between values/ideas and their historical implementation on the one hand, as well as between experience of various types of political and economic conditions. It is in this direction that we are working: how oral history can help in indicating differences and similarities in the memories of different totalitarianisms. Therefore we hope to use the concept, not as a cover, but rather as a challenge to understand variations of subjectivity in history.

In one sense, memory seems to have a flattening effect on the concept of totalitarianism, especially in as far as it recalls different experiences in very similar ways. A striking example of this can be found in the recurrent slips by people interviewed in East Germany, who kept confusing names of mass organizations during the Nazi period and during the Stalinist era—for instance, the Gestapo and State Security (see Ch. 4). But comparable mechanisms also appear in the memories of people of different countries: for example, the contradictions between general remarks denying one's participation in Fascism or Nazism and anecdotes implying that the same person actually accepted help from agencies of the regime or consented to certain aspects, such as the cult of the leader, considered as something different from the regime as a whole—Mussolinism differentiated from Fascism; Hitlerism from Nazism; Stalinism from Communism.²¹ The direction of study that looks for similarities must be pursued, while more often making use of comparative approaches, still very unusual in oral history.

In another sense, thanks to the researches that have been completed so far, we can point to a number of differences between totalitarianisms as indicated by memory. We shall pick the case of Germany again, thanks to the comparisons that can be made between the project on life experience in the GDR (see Chs. 3 and 4) and an oral history project in the Ruhr.²² The comparison indicates that the way people remember National Socialism is very similar in the East to the West, but there are some significant differences between the memories of West and East Germans: in the former, the Jews play a prominent role as victims, while in the latter, this role is taken up by the Russian prisoners of war, forced labourers, and political resistance fighters. Such differences can be attributed to a number of reasons, among which are the differences in political discourse between the two Germanies, including a more economic view in the East, as well as different collective senses of guilt (see Ch. 4).

The length of time seems to have had a different impact on memory, especially if combined with the fact that different generations came under the effect of total domination. That the Italian Fascist regime lasted for twenty years, the Nazi one for more than a decade, and the Stalinist system for seven decades, produced relevant differences for the memories of those who lived under them. Italian militants born before 1920 could, when interviewed by oral historians, retell their life stories as if there was a gap or a parenthesis in them. At the same time,

non-political people of the same age could narrate their biographies as if nothing particular had happened during those two decades; yet, their different types of silence were broken by jokes and contradictions, showing that memory has its own ways of recording and transmitting daily life and its relationship to power. But a similar structure of memory cannot be expected in a situation like the Russian one, especially for people of different age-groups, for whom the experience of the dictatorship covered the whole of their lives, there being neither a 'before' nor an 'after' of living under Stalinism.

At the same time we must expect similar mechanisms to appear even with such different experiences, for instance the impact on memory of feelings of guilt and complicity. A widespread attitude of victimization can be found in testimonies of people who lived under totalitarian regimes, expressed by laying the blame on power and on their own helplessness, as if nothing could be done to resist domination. Significantly, this attitude developed only recently in countries like Russia, under the influence of *perestroika*, but especially following the treatment of the matter in books, films, the media, and public discourse in general; even more significantly, this widespread mechanism of memory is reported to be resented by those who suffered more directly, through imprisonment or harassment, from Stalinist repression. A similar resentment is expressed sometimes by Italian militants when confronted with stories by 'ordinary' people about the 'impossibility' of rebelling. But certainly the issue is enormously complicated by the specificity of oppression in the Soviet Union, where it repeatedly happened that groups of people who had been the agents of oppression became its victims in later periods, like members of the party or the KGB, in the passage from the 1920s to the 1930s (see Ch. 6).

In addition to all this, we know of the different effects that the same experiences can have on people of different ages. The attitude of adolescents to totalitarian regimes often seems to have been one of great enthusiasm when they were raised during those regimes, with all the bitterness of discovering the 'lies' behind the appearance in later stages of youth and adulthood. In turn, the same experiences might have had different meanings and relevances, according to the structure and nature of the family and its relationship with the political power: To what extent, for instance, would a Jewish family in the Soviet Union (or a Catholic family in Spain) share a common memory? Or, on the contrary, could the children have experienced opposing loyalties to

the regime and to the father, the two authorities that might at certain points be at odds with one another?

It is not by chance that the issue of generations, biological as well as political, and of transmission of memory between them is such a crucial one. We may say that in this field oral history has advanced, and in this book there is evidence of such an advance. Ackelsberg gives a stark example of what happens to the legacy of the revolutionary in a period of political repression; she shows that veteran *mujeres librcs*, who had been militants in the organization founded by anarchist women in 1936, and young ones, who took up the name of the organization when they began to mobilize themselves into feminist groups after the death of Franco, proved unable to work together or even talk without degenerating into mutual recriminations and misunderstandings. But she also indicates that the women of *mujeres litres* whom she interviewed had managed to communicate the power of their commitments to their children, who had, in turn, made them their own. No similarly consistent pattern of 'successful transmission' of value could be found among the men, perhaps because women remained the primary child-rearers, even among committed anarchists.

Wierling shows that the generation of East Germans born in the 1920s were affected very differently by the debacle of the 1940s than their parents. While the very elderly tended to collapse personally in the wake of societal collapse, the middle generation appeared to be affected by the period of National Socialism and the Second World War. At the same time, however, the sense of responsibility for their children, and the knowledge that half of their life still lay in front of them motivated them to seek for modes of continuity in their biographies and memories. Thus a direction appears that has not yet been explored in oral history: the relationship between memory, and the future. People's memories of their own past lives, what they remember and what they forget, are shaped by their own expectations for the future, and also by whether they have children or young people for whom they care and who may outlive them. Hopes, fears, and projections converge into shaping memory and its strategies. Oral historians have observed the phenomenon time and again, and are observing it nowadays in the areas that are opening up for research on memory: people who now feel free to narrate their experiences under Stalinism do face the problem of justifying themselves, and at the same time of establishing some sort of continuity in their life stories.

The other extreme in this way of reasoning is the hypothesis that

experience at a given time preshaped or restricted future perceptions and spheres of action (see Ch. 3). This raises the question of to what extent one's memory can be linked with collective memory. Niethammer's work shows the connection between perception, political involvement, and memory; it also indicates that the actual perception must have been far more complex before the observer settled on one particular perspective, and established it in the niche of his memory. Therefore, it is not surprising that for people subjected to totalitarian experiences, the content of protest issues was not only repressed as a public issue, but also lost its salience in private memory. And yet, it seems that the moment of public liberation of private feelings is unforgettable. The particular relevance of the overlapping of public and private experience as a landmark of memory had already been pointed out by oral historians at the International Conference held in Amsterdam in 1980: on that occasion it had become apparent that, by contrast to the silences observed in memories of Nazism and Fascism by Anne Marie Troeger and myself respectively, the experience of the Spanish civil war—a time of close cohesion between public and private experience—was absolutely vivid in the testimonies collected by Ronald Fraser for his *Blood of Spain*.¹³

In the debate that followed the conference, the *History Workshop Journal* editorial collective suggested a comparison with the silence about the general strike of 1926, which they had found in the memory of the English working class.²⁴ They used this example to point out that my explanation for silences in the memory of Fascism could not be generalized, since politics touch individual lives in many different ways. My hypothesis had been that Fascism had accentuated the gap between the political sphere and daily private life, thus creating wounds in the tissue of memory, which could not easily recompose what had been forcefully separated; on the other hand, the testimonies collected by Ronald Fraser sprang from the opposite situation, and resulted from the overlapping of the different spheres of reality in which the civil war had operated its capacity to give meaning to the past, and its link with the present. That debate has not been carried far enough, and there is much space left for further and deeper discussion. What should be stressed at this point, is the importance of the many different types of resistance that oral history has evinced from popular memory of Fascism and anti-Fascism: not only the structured, directly political, clandestine resistance of the militants, but also the daily, cultural, ambivalent opposition—often mixed with forms

of acceptance—that nevertheless obliged the totalitarian powers to attend to negotiation and continuous surveillance. On this point, oral history has indicated that contrasts exist between historiography and memory, in the sense that each one of the two tends to forget some crucial aspects, and that reciprocal critique and collaboration are essential to the understanding of history.

In spite of these achievements and the promise of more by research at present under way, the general context is neither a happy nor an easy one. We are faced with very difficult tasks, and sometimes we doubt whether we are up to them. Consider the consequences of two of the articles presented here. Stern has found that Jews who survived the Holocaust emerged from something that he defines as 'borrowed time': they now feel they live among strangers, and the estrangement is reciprocated by many Germans' memories. In fact, the alienation between the two worlds of experience has led to antagonistic memories: the image of the Jews as perceived by many Germans remains highly stereotypical, as part of the continuous mental flow typical of the *longue duree* of mentalities; while the self-image of many Jews—as well as their image of the Germans—will never be the same after the unprecedented historical rupture they experienced. In Chapter 5, Khubova writes that she did not find a common collective memory in the Kuban. If that is true, it is a very painful finding. Certainly, before accepting such a conclusion, a historian should go to every extreme in order to disprove it; and indeed, individual—if not collective—memory might have preserved some traces, however pale and vague. The risk is, if such an effort of search is not thoroughly done, that historians cancel for the second time whatever trace of memory might exist, and by this second cancellation definitely confirm the victory of the oppressors. In that case, nothing would be left but mourning. We too would have to grow dumb and silent, and recognize our impotence. This sometimes happens to history; history too can be killed, like memory, and then what else could we do but start from another point and take up the search once again? And yet, there would still be the possibility of a work of *pielas* like that of Liliana Picciotto Fargion, who collected the names of the thousands of Jews deported from Italy by the Nazis.²⁵

But we must acknowledge that we actually run the risk of silence—we as Europeans; not merely as oral historians. The 'angel of despair' who speaks the lines by Miiller, at the start of this introduction, is the

angel of our times: he gives with his hands anaesthetics and narcotics, the drugs of oblivion; his discourse is silence and loud sound, not the word. The full meaning of these lines can only be appreciated when they are sung accompanied by Rihm's music, which breaks and lacerates them to portray the anguish of the contemporary discourse and the agony of communication in it, made more acute by the contrast between huge technological possibilities and increasing forms of racism and hatred among peoples.

Opposing the silence and fury which the angel proclaims, and which are all too evident in wars, whether within or between countries, from the Persian gulf to the violence of youth against themselves and others, what strength do we have? As oral historians, we have frail but precious tools: attention to language and form, to how things are remembered, or forgotten; and not only to the contents of memory, but also to what is not remembered, to silences. We have developed ways of analysing stratifications of orality and memory, and put into practice combinations of content analysis, hints from literary criticism, and insights from psychoanalysis and anthropology. An example of how one can work on memory, going beyond the factual aspects of a story, and yet starting from them, is the article by Kovacs (see Ch. 7). He has noticed that his interviewees do not simply remember the common core of a story but richly build it up, so that at times one account differs widely in content from another, but structurally they are all very similar, even though specific details sometimes plainly contradict one another. This is because the concrete elements of memory are arranged around the same dramatically significant turning-points, and because recollection has two levels: a content-concrete level and a structural-organizational one.

The importance of language is brought to us in the most striking way of Leydesdorff's essay, in which she reminds us of the relationship between interviewee and interviewer, on the basis of her own experience. She interviewed a woman living in Haifa, who had emigrated to Israel after a long period of work with very poor children in Bergen-Belsen: Clai>a could not talk about the way in which the children she had worked with had been hungry, nor could she give any other information about their desperate lives, other than by using the official language available at that time for charity workers, saying that they were good children and only needed a little help. The story was told in a language that had not been hers at the time: her success in creating a home for those children had been a result of her lack of

distance, and her immediate solidarity. Yet, her memory was overshadowed by a feeling of loss: all the children were dead, and it was a hopeless effort to transmit some notion of a devastated culture to an interviewer who was much younger and had never lived in a ghetto.

In the face of such problems, the naive claim of oral history, in its early decades, to simply give voice to those who had been silenced by history is almost derisory. Fighting silence is not enough; 'silence' is not even an appropriate term for the task to come: what is to be fought is not only silence but distortions or 'false memory'. Part of the memory that is emerging now, because it is no longer impeded, is sometimes just as 'false' or 'wrong' as the one it opposes: suffice it to think of the anti-Semitic traditions in many countries of the Soviet Union, where the rehabilitation of anti-Stalinists sometimes risks rehabilitating anti-Semitic or even Fascist and Nazi people. The problem is that even 'tradition' is not enough. As Adorno pointed out many years ago, the very idea of tradition has been questioned and put out of date by the developments of capitalism, in which traditions become aesthetic objects for consumption and mass tourism; charming but dead traditions (*la beauté du mort*), as indicated by Michel De Certeau. What is even more deadly is to try and revive them rather than seeing the depth of their destruction and the frailty of their revival, which does not take into full account the distance between their original context and our present one.

The destiny of a traditional memory takes us back to our beginning and to the story with which we started. Now that we are near the end of this introduction, I should like to pose the initial enigma once again, by means of another story. In the *Schachnovelle* (Chess Novel), which Stefan Zweig wrote a few months before committing suicide together with his second wife, in Brazil in 1942, the player who has based his survival from Nazism on his capacity to use memory is defeated by a human automaton, somebody who understands nothing but the game of chess. The former is an Austrian lawyer, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis in a hotel room for four months because he was trying to hide some financial secrets belonging to the Imperial House. They were four months of no human contact, undergoing torture and interrogations, and nothing to do or read. But he had succeeded in stealing a book that happened to contain a series of great chess games; he had learned and memorized them, thus saving his mind and memory, while fooling the Nazis by his resistance. However, he now

succumbs to the mechanical player: he—the cultured, refined, humorous European—is defeated by a man of very poor origins—the son of a Danube boatman, who had been deprived of any culture, ethics, sense of humour, and self-irony. Doctor B. is a real *dilettante*, in the sense that he draws *dilello* (pleasure) from playing; Czentovic is the professional, interested only in winning and making money out of his victories. The former loses because his memory goes berserk under the stress of competition, and he mixes up the game he is now playing with another game that he used to play a long time ago.

The story has its strongest impact on readers by making them feel violently threatened, as if it had a prophetic value and was announcing the deadly risk of people losing everything they value. It is understood that, culturally, readers belong to the European middle classes and cherish their traditions; these traditions, and memories, can no longer compete when the rules of the game are those of the contemporary world. They were enough to stand up to Nazism, but are no longer apt to confront a progeny of Nazism, that is the new illiteracy of robots. It is perhaps not by chance that the fatal game is played on a ship sailing to the USA and leaving Zweig's *geistige Heimal Europa*, his spiritual homeland. No wonder the memory of Europe appears unable to save its values: it shows here some of its strongest limitations, in terms of class values and hierarchy of human beings. However, we can perhaps read the *Schachnovelle* from a new perspective after the collapse of Communism: the outcome of the game between the master and the slave could not save Europe; in other words, the Eastern proletariat would not foster more hopes than the Western *bourgeoisie*—on the contrary, it would impose even worse forms of oppression. To the cold eye of the future the brutal Slav and the refined Austrian rise and fall together, since the one who wins today, and had been a victim for so long, has learned his lesson: he is victorious because he has discovered the market, and now knows its ruthless laws better than his opponent, who does not realize that everything, even leisure and games, has been subjected to those laws. In this way the master of yesterday gains in our eyes a moment of truth, in as far as he retains a touch of humanity that the present is destroying. But our memory cannot be reconciled with the image chosen to symbolize the robot—the Slav, the poor, the peasant—who, like millions of other migrants to the New World, should have had another chance, rather than displaying his shrewdness on the capitalist market.

A possible epilogue could be composed mainly of hopes for the future, while trying to look at the meaning of the *Schachnovelle* from a different perspective. It is not merely by chance that the connection between memory and otherness has been emphasized by those who have tried to reformulate the heritage of Europe in the present world, and to bring democracy 'up to date'.²⁶ The hope is that the memory of Europe can be reformulated in such a way as to be comprehensible, even if not acceptable, to people of all social groups in all parts of the world. Today, it is the multiplicity and diversity of memories, as well as of languages, that constitute the only privilege of Europe. It is the closeness of so many different forms of expression in such a narrow space and with equal dignity that memory will have to reflect and transmit. Memory—or better: memories—can help us to find ways, in the era of equality and cosmopolitanism, 'to participate in the other, to share his/her being other'.²⁷ For us, the task is to participate in different memories, to share their differences not in any way in an attempt to demonstrate their universality but rather to insist on the diversity and plurality of memory. Engaging in this task, inventing ways of facing up to this challenge, will be the contribution that oral historians along with all those concerned with the processes of remembering can make, in order to detach human memory from all forms of totalitarianism, in politics as well as in culture, and to help it play its part in the forming of a democratic consciousness.

Notes

1. The lines by Heiner Müller are part of *Frau/Slimme*, for soprano, and orchestra with soprano, composed by Wolfgang Rihm in 1989.
2. *Memoria* was a joint production by the Nordisk Theater Laboratorium of I Iolstebro, Denmark, and the Teatro Tascabile of Bergamo, Italy. I saw the version performed in Turin in Jan. 1991: it was directed by Eugenio Barba of the Odin Teatret, with Else Marie Laukvik and Frans Winther as actors; Yiddish folk-songs and music were by Frans Winther.
3. Jean Amery is the pseudonym of Hans Mayer, born 1912, a Jewish writer in the German language. He was deported to Auschwitz as a member of the Belgian Resistance and committed suicide in 1978.
4. Paolo Jedlowski, 'Il testimone e l'eroe: La socialità della memoria', in id. and Margherita Rampazi (eds.), *// senso del passato: Per una sociologia della memoria*, Milan, 1991, 15.
5. Patrice Meyer-Bisch in *Forces eljaiblesses des lotalitarismes*, Actes du IV Colloque sur les totalitarismes, Fribourg, 1987, 108 ff.
6. Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia: Una difesa delle regole del gioco*, Turin, 1984, 4-6.
7. Id., *L'età dei diritti*, Turin, 1990.

8. Edgar Morin Ernest A. Menze (ed.), *Totalitarianism Reconsidered*, Port Washington, 1991, 22.
9. Peter Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands: Roman*, Frankfurt am Main, 1978; trans. *Esthetique de la resistance*, Paris: 174.
10. Paul la Hausse, 'Oral history and South African historians', *Radical History Review*, 46/7 (1990).
11. *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 12 (1990).
12. Jean Widmer in *Forces eljaiblesses*.
13. Stephen J. Lee, *The European Dictatorships 1918-1945*, London and New York, 1987, xi.
14. Menze, 'Obedience and human autonomy', in id., *Totalitarianism*, 234—5.
15. Maria Ferretti, 'La memoria mutilata. Storia e memoria nell'Unione sovietica degli anni ottanta: La società sovietica alla ricerca di un'identità', unpublished manuscript.
16. Mikhail Rojanski, 'Tsaritsine, Stalingrad ou Volvograd? L'éternel débat sur les toponymes', in Alain Brossat, Sonia Come, Jean-Yves Potel, and Jean-Charles Szurek (eds.), *A VES la mémoire retrouvée*, Paris, 1990 (reviewed here).
17. Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de la mémoire*, Paris, 1987.
18. Jacques Le Goff, 'Preface' to *A l'ESl la mémoire retrouvée*, 9.
19. This term, from Ernst Bloch, is taken up by Brossat et al., 'Introduction' to *A TESl la mémoire retrouvée*, 21 ff.
20. Morin in Menze, *Totalitarianism*.
21. Luisa Passerini, *Alusolini immaginano: Storia di una biografia 1915—1939*, Rome and Bari, 1991.
22. Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *'Die Jahre weiss man nicht, wo man die huculc hinselzen soll'. Faschismus-Erfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet: Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet*, Berlin and Bonn, 1983; id., (ed.), *'Hinterher, weiss man, dass es nchtig war, class cs schiefgegangen hi'. Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*, Berlin and Bonn, 1983; id., and Alexander von Plato (eds.), *'Wir kriegenjetzt andere Zeiten'. Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Länden*, Berlin and Bonn, 1984; Niethammer, von Plato and Dorothee Wierling (eds.), *Die volkseigene F.rjahung: Eine Archdologie des Lebens in der Industriezone der DDR*, Berlin, 1991.
23. Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War, 1936-9*, London, 1989.
24. Editorial: 'Oral history', *History Workshop*, 8 (1979). "
25. Liliana Picciotto Fargion, *// libra della memoria: Gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943-1945)*, Milan, 1991.
26. Jacques Derrida, *L'Autre Cap. La Démocratie ajournée*, Paris, 1991; trans. Oggi "l'Europa, Milan, 1991, 25.
27. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas*, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1989; trans. L'eredità dell'Europa, Turin, 1991, 46.